



TO WHAT EXTENT DO GENDER NORMS IN GREEK MYTHOLOGY REFLECT THE SOCIAL-CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF ANCIENT GREECE?

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ABSTRACT

Ancient Greek mythology, the most well-known branch of classical mythology, has been the subject of interest to many scholars, philosophers, and even readers and students to this day. This paper attempts to extract key concepts from the myths and compare it to the ancient Greek civilization, and how components of Greek's ancient culture and values can be seen reflected in the series of folklore. Upon observation and research, Greek mythology is a myriad of ancient Greek social subjects including the role and portrayal of women and the presence of homosexuality. Discovering how the tales of Greek myths reflect the ancient Greek culture helps understand the basis of the civilization that has contributed extensively to the modern world and how different cultures develop values and uphold their own unique set of morals and principles.

KEYWORDS: Ancient, Greek, mythology, culture, values.

INTRODUCTION

Greek mythology has had a continuous and enduring presence across generations, permeating various forms of modern media such as movies, novels, TV shows, and video games (Hetherington, 2019). These ancient legends and folklore serve as allusions, reflecting the deep influence and relevance of Greek mythology in contemporary culture. Oxford Advanced American Dictionary defines mythology as "ancient myths in general" or "the ancient myths of a particular culture or society." This definition underscores the intrinsic connection between mythology and culture, highlighting how mythology acts as a reflection of cultural values and beliefs. Consequently, it is evident that mythology and culture are inherently intertwined, mutually influencing and shaping each other. Greek mythology, in particular, serves as a mirror of ancient Greek culture, delving into societal themes such as the role of women and homosexuality in a manner that aligns with the social norms prevalent in Greek civilization.

Materials & Methods

This paper attempts to analyze Greek mythology in relation to ancient Greek culture. The mirroring of social-cultural values in Greek mythology and ancient Greece was observed through two questions:

1. To what extent do the cultural norms and societal values depicted in Greek mythology align with ancient Greek society?
2. How were social issues regarding gender norms such as the role and view of women and homosexuality reflected in both Greek mythology in relation to ancient Greek society?

Extensive secondary research was conducted to better understand how Greek mythology reflected ancient Greek values. All research was qualitative. No experiments were performed, but few primary sources such as the works of Hesiod were read and interpreted throughout the study for further research. The hymns, poems, and myths written by ancient Greek poets provided a wealth of information due to the originality and reliability of the sources.

Results & Discussion

Through extensive secondary research, it was determined that the link between Greek mythology and ancient Greek culture was inextricable; completely mirroring the values and beliefs being reflected. This paper focused solely on the social aspects; specifically issues about gender roles, stereotypes, and depictions of certain genders. Not only did the negative portrayal of women in Greek mythology mirror the misogynistic Greek culture, the existence of homosexuality further proved the unique gender roles the Greek culture seemed to be undertaking with some male youths adopting feminine traits when 'submissive and feminine' characteristics were deemed shameful in the patriarchal Greek society.

Portrayal of Women

Greek culture was a strongly patriarchal society, and as Gracie Durham (2019) pointed out; "Men were all-powerful and dominating, while women were shameful and deceitful" (Durham, pg. 1). during the ancient times of Greece. They were often blamed for the downfall of men in ancient Greek myths that warned men about the dangers of allowing a woman any form of independence. They were often depicted as manipulative and deceitful, known to be hazardous to men and devious through many different myths. The villainous roles and actions of women in Greek mythology were developed and emphasized due to ancient Greek male fears; that women would become disloyal and uncontrollable (Meehan, 2017). Through two case studies of the myth of Pandora and the myth

of Lamia, the double standards set upon women in ancient Greek culture can be further discussed by two different cases in which women were depicted as evil, hazardous, and monstrous. These two will be discussed in more detail now.

The Myth of Pandora

The tale of Pandora is a tale of a young woman that had come to plague the world with all its curses. According to Hesiod's *Theogony*, Pandora was a consequence of Prometheus' betrayal. After Prometheus had stolen fire from Mount Olympus and bestowed it upon humans as a gift, it enraged Zeus. Zeus ordered Hephaestus, the Greek god of fire and divine craftsman, to create Pandora. Then, in Hesiod's *Works and Days*, Prometheus's brother Epimetheus takes Pandora as his wife against Prometheus' warning to not accept any gift from Zeus. Zeus had given Pandora a foolish, mischievous, and idle nature, while Hera had given her the 'gift' of curiosity. Zeus gave her a box, warning her against opening it to check its contents. Due to her curious nature, Pandora ended up opening the box and releasing all manner of misery and evil into the world, such as deceit, battle, war, and old age. Only hope remained in the box. Many believe this myth exists to provide two purposes. One, to explain how disobedience and meddling with the unknown due to excessive curiosity can be harmful and consequential. Two, to symbolize that hope remains somewhere in the world even if we are plagued with all sorts of hardships. However, while what the majority of the people believe about this myth is true, the underlying theme of the myth is a story originating from the misogynistic culture of Greek society. The myth takes an exaggerated stance in describing how women are harmful; asserting that women are the reason why evils exist. "For from her is the race of women and female kind: of her is the deadly race and tribe of women who live amongst mortal men to their great trouble, no helpmeets in hateful poverty, but only in wealth." (Hesiod, 700 BCE, pp. 590-93). Doctrinal bias against women can also be seen mirrored in many other cultures during similar time frames, including Eve in the Holy Bible. She was the first woman, and she was the one who took initiative to sin first, encouraging her male counterpart Adam to join her. In Pandora's myth it did not matter that all the male deities deserved to take part in some of the blame. Pandora the woman was designed to take all responsibility and blame. The patriarchal Greek society can be seen reflected in this myth by how Pandora had become the greatest curse to men; therefore, instilling the notion in ancient Greek culture that women were to blame, and that they were subordinate to men (Meehan, 2017).

The Myth of Lamia

Lamia is one of lesser-known demons of Greek mythology, but her existence is still present to feed the patriarchal beliefs of Greek society. Lamia was a beautiful queen of Libya before she turned into a monster. Her beauty caught the attention of Zeus, and it eventually led to an affair. Hera, Zeus' wife, was furious to find out about this affair, and took Lamia's children away. Devastated by the loss of her children, Lamia tore her own eyes out and roamed around, looking for other children to devour. Lamia represents a deep-seated fear about the threats women pose to children in their socially prescribed roles as primary caregivers (Zimmerman, 2021). Lamia is not only physically disturbing; she goes around and eats other families' children; representing the danger of women towards children and households. The patriarchal element in this story describes how the ancient Greek culture worried excessively about whether women were going to fail in their obligation to be a mother and nurturer or not. "If a woman rejects motherhood, expresses ambivalence about motherhood, loves her child too much or loves them too little, all of these acts are perceived as violations, albeit to varying degrees." (McGreevy, 2021). To deviate in any way from the prescribed

motherhood narrative was to be made a monster, a destroyer of children in ancient Greek culture, symbolizing the portrayal of women through double standards and high expectations. (Zimmerman, 2021). The myth of Lamia not only portrays women through physical monstrosity by contrasting Lamia's old beauty to her resulting ugliness, but they also depict women as destructors of households and society.

The Presence of Homosexuality

Greek mythology is a direct representation for the acceptance of homosexuality in ancient Greek culture. Many scholars suggest that ancient Greece was a 'gay utopia', with same-sex relationships flourishing with no discrimination, even more so than modern society. Although gay couples were significantly more prominent in ancient Greece due to men exercising more rights than women, lesbian culture was inevitably also significantly present. The word 'lesbian' was derived from the Greek island Lesbos. "The term came to describe women who love women after the island's most famous resident, the poet Sappho." (Belge, 2017). The poet Sappho of Lesbos lived in 600 BC. She was an intellectual and poet who wrote love poems to other women. Her poems speak clearly to her love and infatuation with other women. Most commonly, however, was a practice called pederasty in which older males would have sexual or romantic relationships with adolescent males. "The origins of pederasty appear to be related to the relatively late age of marriage for males, which evolved as a response to the need to limit population growth in the scarcity-driven economy of the 7th century BCE. The contexts of pederastic socialization (athletics, military comradeship, hunting, cockfighting, and intellectual/musical performance at elite symposia) point toward masculinizing pedagogy and mentorship as key social function." (Hubbard, 2020). Not only was homosexuality deemed completely normal, but it was also viewed as quite beneficial in some cases. Social openness towards homosexuality can be seen reflected in Greek mythology, through countless depictions of romantic relationships within the same sex. One of the most popular examples would be the abduction of Ganymede, a beautiful young Trojan prince who Zeus had been infatuated with and carried up to Mount Olympus to be his cupbearer. Countless other examples exist, and other gods such as Apollo, Dionysus, and even Artemis and Aphrodite were depicted to have romantic relationships with the same sex in many pieces of classical poems and Greek mythology.

Literature Review

The main secondary sources used to write this paper is the essay "Containing the Kalon Kakon: The Portrayal of Women in Ancient Greek Mythology" by Dessa Meehan, and the article "Why So Many Mythological Monsters are Female" by Nora McGreevy. Both sources described precisely how women were depicted in ancient Greek mythology and what their feminine gender roles and portrayals in society were. Many contemporary scholars agree upon the idea that societal issues such as the topic of gender roles had a major impact on mythology, and in many cases, vice versa. According to these sources, some argue that it was the negative portrayal of women in Greek literature and mythology that encouraged the patriarchal society of Greece, while some argue that the set doctrinal beliefs of the Greek society has shaped and created the myths that negatively portray women. While most scholars today agree upon the central idea that ancient Greece had set gender roles and principles in which men and women had to follow, some scholars argue otherwise. One of the other main sources used to further study this social issue was the article "How the Ancient Greeks Viewed Pederasty and Homosexuality" by Tim Brinkhof. This article argues that men sometimes were subject to 'feminine' or submissive roles in homosexual relationships, therefore bending and confusing the social gender norms in ancient Greek society.

Pederasty was a common practice in ancient Greece, in which older men had sexual-romantic relationships with younger males. These relationships were often a coming-of-age process to adolescent males, in which the older man not only served as a lover, but also as a mentor set to guide the young boy through adulthood. According to Brinkhof, "The things we consider acceptable and unacceptable are dictated by our cultures and, as such, are subject to change." (Brinkhof, 2023) Although conservatives in contemporary society are the ones to mostly deem homosexuality as unacceptable, ancient Greek society did not consider homosexuality as taboo. In ancient Greek times, attraction towards men or women did not matter significantly; what mattered was the role in the relationship. The roles were either to be dominant (active) or submissive (passive). Although classical beliefs set the woman as the submissive partner and the man as the dominant partner, Greek society had allowed young men to take upon the 'feminine' role. And consequently, in Greece's capital city Athens, there were some mixed opinions about why "a male was to adopt a submissive role that was unworthy of a free citizen." (Cohen, 1987). This was because a woman at the time was deemed not any better than a child and were not considered citizens.

All the main secondary sources used to provide the basis for this paper strive to elaborate further and research the social-cultural norms reflected in ancient Greek mythology and society regarding gender roles. The first two sources introduced in the introduction paragraph of the literature review section cover the depiction of women in Greek mythology and their negative portrayal, while the third secondary source described how some men in homosexual relationships took upon the submissive, therefore 'feminine' role, therefore blurring the line between gender norms and stereotypes when women were supposed to be sub-

missive and inferior while men were all-powerful and dominating.

Conclusions

Based on all the evidence gathered and research conducted, it can be concluded that Greek mythology extensively reflects the social views on gender roles and stereotypes of ancient Greeks. Not only does the continuous monstrous depiction of women in Greek mythology emphasize the patriarchal Greek culture centered around the superiority of men; Greek mythology also portrays the uniqueness of gender roles in ancient Greek culture through the presence of homosexuality and how 'superior' men tended to take on submissive female roles in pederastic relationships.

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